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Teaching Philosophy

### The Nature of a Classroom

I never took to sitting at a desk in a row facing a blackboard, listening at length to discourse that soon became reminiscent of Charlie Brown's teacher and her "Wah, wah, wahs." My mind was less interested in procedures and more interested in possibilities. How does that work? What will happen next? If that happened instead, where would we be now?

The teachers and students in my life whom I engaged with both taught and encouraged exploration, creativity, and curiosity, not rote memorization of facts and figures so prevalent in the world of education. It is those that took me from "thinking outside of the box" to "there are no boxes" from whom I draw for inspiration in my own teaching and learning journey and to whom I look when pondering my own teaching philosophy.

One of the best lessons I learned that pushed me further onto the path of teaching was as an undergraduate in a semester-long immersion program; 14 students, one professor, and four months of outdoor education. On a warm fall day, our group was driven along a snaking gravel road to a rickety gate at the base of the rolling Carolina foothills. We were released one at a time from the white gas-guzzling beast that was carrying us to traverse a dirt path that led into the woods. Our only instructions from Professor Clyde were to, "Mosey. In silence. Just see what you see."

It soon became my time to alight from the van and I began the journey up the mountain. I passed fields of wildflowers, the remnants of a homestead, a couple of salamanders, deer tracks, a dilapidated shed, and a waterfall, joining my class at the top of a cliff several hours later. Our class sat in silence overlooking the valley we seemed to be kings of, taking in the sunset as Clyde gingerly placed a strip of paper in our hands. It read:

"Let nature be your teacher." -Wordsworth

In five words the world burst open, articulating what I had always known, yet lacked the expression for. Wordsworth's words echoed through the mountains through every tree, rock, and animal. I knew in my being that all life is derived from nature, and all learning, directly or indirectly, comes from it.

Nature is where I choose to teach from and explore, whether it be human nature, the nature of words, or the natural world. I want to challenge my students to ask deeper questions and make profound connections by exploring their own nature and the nature of others through texts and theatre. I want my students to investigate who they are and how they fit (and don't fit!) into the world. I want my students to explore and explain the points of view of various authors and artists including themselves. This, to me, is the heart of Wordsworth's statement.

As a student of nature, I liken individuals' education to the life of a spider. Spiders are born from a sack filled with hundreds of others with equal opportunities. Each baby spider has a

small string of web, of possibility, dangling from his or herself. Each spider, like a student, has to latch on to an opportunity and make it the best they can for themselves, even though some spiders have more resources than others. Some spiders move on instinct, while others need more time to learn. It takes a creative teacher to help all spider-students find opportunities, discover and hone the skills they are born with, introduce them to new ideas, and effectively use the tools they are afforded.

Now comes the time for spiders to build a web, shooting strings out in all directions, looking to attach to something solid, yet forgiving. This is similar to humans finding their own ground to stand on, learning from the world they are born into where they can safely thrive and where they cannot. A teacher, in this case, has the chance to be solid enough for the student to rely on, yet flexible and forgiving, nurturing a space where spider-students can make mistakes, triumph, and thrive.

As a spider weaves, it goes through many trials before constructing a web that will withstand the elements. Spiders use their webs to catch whatever they can, dislodging what they don't like or what would disagree with their appetite. What spiders do with food from their web is exactly what humans do with knowledge from their world. Human knowledge is brain sustenance, and like spiders, a new piece is unnecessary every day- sometimes one piece will satisfy for many moons. A teacher must send a bundle of bugs to their spider-students, helping them sort out and articulate their likes and dislikes, exploring all sides of an issue or idea before discarding it or moving on.

Every once in a while, something perceivably bigger and stronger than a spider comes by to destroy all it has created. Yet a spider perseveres, building something stronger, something smarter. This is where the metaphor quakes and more of my core beliefs as a teacher take over! Spiders never, ever give up. They use everything they know to keep going. Size and strength doesn't phase a spider, and I don't want it to phase my students. If something or someone knocks my students down, I want them to know how to get back up. When my students feel they are at their zenith, I want them to continue seeking knowledge as sustenance. I want to empower my students through role-playing, literature, self and selfless recognition, and debate. I want to support a sustainable classroom of independent thinkers who know how to connect with people and ideas.

Experiential education, dramatic play, listening to my students, keeping detailed observations of those in my classes, and monitoring progress (my students and mine!) throughout the school year will help me create the classroom I envision. I see an evolving collaborative where everyone is heard, yet disagreements still exist. In this classroom, we are all teachers and we are all learners. I want to encourage my students to look to nature for guidance, as I will continue to do so, constantly aware that things and people aren't always what they seem. After all, is it not the tiniest spider that produces the strongest material on earth?